

**The Incidence of Aid to the Blind in  
Four New England States**

*By Ruth S. Brush* (2 copies)

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By RUTH S. BRUSH

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Washington, D. C.

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of the author rather than official opinions of the  
Social Security Board*

# THE INCIDENCE OF AID TO THE BLIND IN FOUR NEW ENGLAND STATES

RUTH S. BRUSH \*

The number of individuals receiving aid to the blind in relation to the population varies widely among States administering this type of public assistance under the provisions of title X of the Social Security Act. Even within the New England area variation is great. In April 1938 four New England States—Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont—were administering approved plans for aid to the blind under the Social Security Act. Maine has consistently administered aid to more blind persons, in relation to total population, than any other State administering aid to the blind under the act. The wide variation in the rates in the four neighboring New England States invites speculation as to the factors contributing to the differences in the extent to which this program has been put into effect.

Among the important factors are variations in the extent of blindness in the general population; varying policies in transferring to the old-age assistance program recipients of aid to the blind who are eligible to receive old-age assistance; and inevitable differences in the several States' interpretation of "need."

In the four New England States an individual is considered to be blind if with correcting lenses he has 20/200 or less vision in the better eye or a corresponding limitation of the visual field.

## Census of the Blind

Little information is available concerning the actual extent of blindness in the United States. While a census of the blind was taken as part of the Fifteenth Decennial Census of the United States in 1930, the Bureau of the Census recognizes that the data on blindness are neither accurate nor complete.<sup>1</sup> The census enumerators did not record information concerning blind persons on the population schedule but used a supplementary schedule, on which was entered the name, sex, race, age, and post-office address of any person who was blind. It is probable that the

enumerators sometimes failed to obtain information for this supplementary schedule either through negligence or because of the tendency on the part of relatives to conceal the presence of blind persons in their families. Furthermore, the degree of visual defect was not determined by medical criteria.

According to the census, Maine had the largest proportion of blind individuals in the general population reported by any New England State, and Massachusetts had the smallest proportion reported by any of the four States included in this study. Only two States—Missouri and New Mexico—showed larger proportions of blind persons than Maine. In Maine in 1930, as shown in table 1, the census enumerated 626 blind persons in the population, but in April 1938 there were 1,268 recipients of aid to the blind, or twice the 1930 number. The Division of Pensions, the agency which administers aid to the blind under the Social Security Act, reports that all but six recipients of aid to the blind have been examined by ophthalmologists. The discrepancy between the two figures is partly accounted for by the passage of time. Without doubt, also, the census enumeration was incomplete for the State.

In April 1938 New Hampshire also was providing aid to more blind individuals than were

Table 1.—Number of blind individuals and number per 100,000 population enumerated in 1930, listed on State registers on selected dates, and receiving aid to the blind in four New England States, April 1938

Item	Maine	Massachusetts	New Hampshire	Vermont
Number of blind individuals:				
Fifteenth Decennial Census of the United States: 1930	626	1,024	251	223
State register of the blind <sup>1</sup>	5,270	667		
Receiving aid to the blind, April 1938	1,268	1,068	290	141
Number of blind individuals per 100,000 total population:				
Fifteenth Decennial Census of the United States: 1930	79	45	34	62
State register of the blind <sup>2</sup>	119	131		
Receiving aid to the blind, April 1938	148	24	37	37

\* Bureau of Research and Statistics, Division of Public Assistance Research.

<sup>1</sup> Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, *The Blind and Deaf-Mutes in the United States, 1930*, p. 2.

<sup>1</sup> Data for Massachusetts are as of Nov. 30, 1937; for New Hampshire, as of May 21, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Rates based on total population estimated by the Social Security Board with the advice of the U. S. Bureau of the Census as of July 1, 1937.



enumerated in 1930. In the other two States, however, the number of recipients in April 1938 was less than the number of persons enumerated as "blind" in 1930. (See table 1.)

### State Registers of the Blind

In two States—Massachusetts and New Hampshire—additional information is available as to the extent of blindness. Both the division of the blind of the Department of Education in Massachusetts and the Board of Welfare and Relief in New Hampshire maintain registers which are intended to include all blind persons in the State. These registers are believed by the agencies maintaining them to be substantially complete and accurate.<sup>2</sup> No medical tests, however, are given in either State as a prerequisite to registration, and some of the persons registered doubtless would not be considered blind according to objective standards approved by the Social Security Board for use in establishing eligibility for aid to the blind. On November 30, 1937, there were 5,270 persons listed on the Massachusetts register, as contrasted with the 1,924 persons enumerated in 1930 and the 1,058 persons receiving aid to the blind in April 1938 under a plan approved by the Social Security Board. In New Hampshire there were 667 persons listed on the State register on May 21, 1938, as contrasted with the 251 enumerated in 1930 and the 290 receiving aid to the blind under the Social Security Act in April of this year. (See table 1.)

Comparison of the figures in table 1 indicates that there is no reliable basis for approximating the extent of blindness in the population of the two States which do not maintain registers. It cannot, therefore, be determined with any degree of accuracy whether there is any direct relationship between the extent of blindness and the extent to which blind persons are aided in Maine and Vermont.

### Age Requirements

Other variable factors which have an important bearing on the rates for aid to the blind are the minimum and maximum age limitations prescribed by statute or by policy for eligibility for aid to the blind in the different States. Of the

<sup>2</sup> It may be that there are still on the register some names of persons whose vision has been restored or who have died.

**Table 2.—Number of individuals and number per 100,000 population<sup>1</sup> in specified age groups receiving aid to the blind in April 1938**

State	Recipients of specified age						
	Total, all ages			16-64 years		65 years and over	
	Number	Number per 100,000 total population		Number	Number per 100,000 population 16-64 years	Number	Number per 100,000 population 65 years and over
		All ages	16 years and over				
Maine.....	1,268	148	205	499	93	769	915
Massachusetts.....	1,068	24	32	813	27	245	76
New Hampshire.....	290	67	77	142	44	148	235
Vermont.....	141	37	51	85	35	56	147

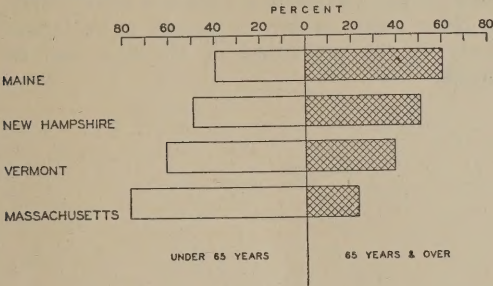
<sup>1</sup> Based on population in specified age groups estimated as of July 1, 1937, by the Social Security Board with the advice of the U. S. Bureau of the Census.  
<sup>2</sup> No estimates of population aged 16-21 are available; it was, therefore, necessary to make age 16 the lower limit for the computations for Massachusetts and Vermont, although these 2 States do not administer aid to blind persons under 21 years of age.

four New England States, none gives this type of public assistance to children under 16 years of age. Needy blind children under 16 are doubtless cared for under some other program. Sixteen is the minimum age prescribed by the Maine law and is also the minimum age according to New Hampshire policy. The Massachusetts and Vermont laws, however, establish the minimum age at 21 years. Since, in all four States, no individuals under 16 years of age are eligible to receive aid to the blind, the rates might well be based on the population 16 years of age and over, rather than on the total population. Changing the base increases the rates materially, as is shown in table 2.

Policies also differ among the States with respect to maximum age. In Massachusetts, the policy is to transfer to the old-age assistance program those recipients of aid to the blind who reach the age of 65 and meet the other requirements of the program. Furthermore, no applications are accepted from aged blind individuals who are eligible for old-age assistance. On the other hand, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont do not transfer aged blind persons to the old-age assistance program and ordinarily accept applications from aged blind persons even though they are eligible for old-age assistance. Thus the proportions of individuals of different ages receiving aid to the blind vary significantly in

the several States. This difference in policy, of course, has an important bearing on the rates, since it is well established that the incidence of blindness increases with age.

**Chart I.—Percentage distribution of individuals receiving aid to the blind, under 65 years of age and 65 years of age and over, in four New England States, April 1938**



Analysis by age of the recipients of aid to the blind in each of the four States has been made to determine the relative proportion of individuals in different age groups. These proportions, as of April 1938, are shown in table 3.

In Maine, 61 percent of the recipients of aid to the blind are 65 years of age and over, as compared with only 23 percent in Massachusetts, where the policy is to transfer the aged blind to the old-age assistance rolls when possible. In New Hampshire 51 percent, and in Vermont 40 percent of the recipients of aid to the blind are 65 years of age and over. The relative proportions of recipients under 65, and 65 and over, are shown in chart I.

To determine the effect of age on the relative numbers of recipients, separate rates have been computed for the group under 65 years of age and for the group aged 65 and over. The first was computed on the estimated population 16-64 years of age and the second on the estimated population 65 years of age and over. These rates are given in table 2.

In the group under 65 years of age, the rate in Maine is 93 per 100,000 population 16-64 years of age. This is more than twice the corresponding New Hampshire rate and nearly three times the comparable Vermont rate. In Maine, the rate for recipients 65 years of age and over is 915 per 100,000 population in that age

group. This rate is more than three times the corresponding rate in New Hampshire and more than six times that in Vermont, which has the same policy of retaining aged blind persons on the rolls of the agency for the blind. It is evident that in both the younger and older age groups, the Maine rates are exceptionally high in relation to those of neighboring States.

### Variability of Standards of Need

A third important factor affecting the incidence of aid to the blind is the variability in the standards of need applied in determining eligibility in the different States. Facts concerning the standards of need can be obtained only by a study of budgets and of individual case records, which has not been possible in this analysis.

### In Summary

It is clear that, although rates based on the total population of the States are necessarily an extremely crude measure for determining or comparing the incidence of aid to the blind, adequate rates cannot be computed until the extent of blindness in the population of the different States is satisfactorily established. The 1930 census data on blindness were admittedly unsatisfactory for this purpose. The State registers, although they are believed by the agencies maintaining

**Table 3.—Age distribution of recipients of aid to the blind in four New England States, April 1938**

Age in completed years	Maine	Massachusetts	New Hampshire	Vermont
Number of recipients				
Total.....	1,268	1,058	290	141
16-34.....	76	125	24	13
35-49.....	145	290	47	27
50-64.....	278	428	71	45
65-79.....	478	181	115	38
80 and over.....	291	62	33	17
Percent				
Total.....	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
16-34.....	6.0	11.8	8.3	9.2
35-49.....	11.4	24.6	16.2	19.1
50-64.....	21.9	40.4	24.5	31.9
65-79.....	37.7	17.1	39.6	27.0
80 and over.....	23.0	5.9	11.4	12.1

<sup>1</sup> Includes 2 recipients, aged 65 years or over, exact age unknown; represents 0.2 percent.

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them to be substantially complete, do not demand medical tests as a prerequisite to registration and are not therefore on a basis comparable to the standards on which eligibility for aid is established. Without doubt, the rates could be made somewhat more comparable by using as the base the general population of the age groups actually benefiting from the program for aid to the blind. The age groups affected, however, vary from State to State with differences in statutes and policies. Until it is possible to compute rates on the population at risk—that

is, on the blind population in specified age groups—it will be important to keep always in mind the fact that the crude rates must be interpreted in the light of various variable factors for which, at the present time, positive adjustment cannot be made.

In conclusion, it would seem within the province of this article to suggest that one of the research foundations for the blind or some Federal or other public or private agency make further study of the prevalence of blindness and its causes.











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Among the important factors are variations in the extent of blindness in the general population; varying policies in transferring to the old-age assistance program recipients of aid to the blind who are eligible to receive old-age assistance; and inevitable differences in the several States' interpretation of "need."

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enumerators sometimes failed to obtain information for this supplementary schedule either through negligence or because of the tendency on the part of relatives to conceal the presence of blind persons in their families. Furthermore, the degree of visual defect was not determined by medical criteria.

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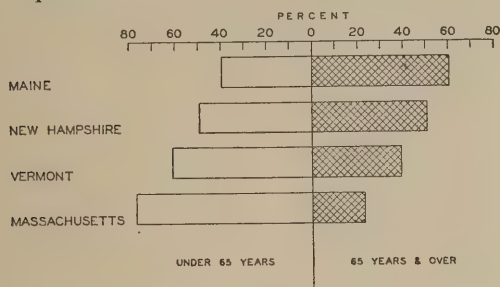
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